

# The role of CSR in high Potential recruiting: literature review on the communicative expectations of high potentials

The role of CSR  
in recruiting

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify what attention science pays to CSR communication for the process of career orientation and employer decision-making by the critical sought after top talent.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The review is structured as a systematic literature review of the CSR–HRM intersection. In 11 EBSCO online databases one of several “CSR-terms” was combined with one of several “HRM-terms”.

**Findings** – Although CSR has long been recognized as a relevant factor for organizational attractiveness (Greening and Turban, 2000) and talent attraction and its importance is reflected in the ongoing “war for talent” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) in which (prospective) leaders are considered a critical human resource for corporate success (Ansoff, 1965), few contributions are focusing on successfully recruited future leaders/high potentials.

**Practical implications** – There is a knowledge gap about the importance of CSR in high potential recruiting, which influences both resource-strong decisions on the company side and the communication behavior of applicants. Companies only know about a general CSR relevance for employees and applicants. Accordingly, no attention-optimized CSR communication can take place. In the highly competitive battle for the attention of high potentials, this leads to undifferentiated communication formats. At the same time, high potentials may not receive the CSR information of interest to them from an employer at the relevant time and therefore cannot present an optimal fit in the cover letters and thus cannot prove themselves as ideal candidates.

**Originality/value** – CSR is not only an obligatory field of communication for companies, but also a special opportunity in recruiting the young value-oriented generations Y and Z. The research on CSR communication in the course of their career decision has not been covered in a review so far, the research situation is thus explicitly addressed for the first time and practical implications for the post COVID-19 employer brand and recruiting communication are addressed.

**Keywords** CSR, Corporate identity, Employer branding, Recruiting, War for talent, High potentials

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Even in the digitalized working world of the 21st century, corporate success does not result solely from product quality, scalability or social need. These factors are the basis for positive business development, but they do not ensure it. In the long term, the company itself is the driving force that brings about future viability and success – the employees (Turker, 2009). Therefore, the logical consequence is that all companies strive to attract extremely capable employees, with (junior) managers, in particular, being strategically relevant (Ansoff, 1965), as they play a crucial role in shaping the corporate culture and act as cultural testimonials.

Due to demographic change, however, companies face a shortage of qualified employees in many areas, including the central area of (prospective) managers. They are jointly responsible for business orientation and dynamic management in change processes. The question, therefore,



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arises as to how the best talents can be won for one's own company in the existing "war for talent" (Chambers *et al.*, 1998). This question has been examined from various research perspectives in recent years, focusing mainly on the companies (Jones, 2010; Brammer *et al.*, 2015; Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016) and the acquisition of young talent rather than the perspective of the seeking young talent themselves.

In an intersection of human resources (HR)/recruiting and values research, the importance of salary (Cable and Judge, 1994; Waples and Brachle, 2020; Twenge and Kasser, 2013; Rynes *et al.*, 1983; Schuler and Rogovsky, 1998) and other benefits (Leveson and Joiner, 2014; Ng *et al.*, 2010) to applicant decision-making has long been researched. In addition, research on the development and performance of recruiting channels as well as social media recruiting, which is gaining in importance, is being conducted in a practical, and often country-specific, manner (Aggerholm and Andersen, 2018; Krishna and Mohan, 2016; Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018; SilkRoad, 2019; Hesse and Mattmüller, 2015). Here, at least since Facebook's *Cambridge Analytica scandal*, a significant ethical perspective also problematizes the data protection issue with its legal consequences (Gelinis *et al.*, 2017).

Due to the changed labor market situation, however, the perspective of job seekers and applicants has also received increased attention in the recent past. Based on the person-organization fit (P-O fit) model (Kristof, 1996), the value-based respectively cultural fit between employer and employee is assessed as significant for long-term and productive employment (DeRoeck *et al.*, 2014; Brammer *et al.*, 2015; Baric, 2017). That has resulted in many contributions to organizational attractiveness (Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Greening and Turban, 2000; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Highhouse *et al.*, 2003), as well as organizational commitment and organizational citizenship (Turker, 2009; Mueller *et al.*, 2012; Dögl and Holtbrügge, 2014; Rupp *et al.*, 2013) and finally corporate identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Karmasin and Karmasin, 1996). In addition, social science research focuses on the job search behavior of prospective employees and the influence of demographic factors such as age, gender or education level (Manroop and Richardson, 2016; Saks, 2006; Zhang *et al.*, 2020; Blau, 1964).

However, even if the focus is placed on the applicant situation, communication and decision-making processes are viewed more from both sides, and influencing factors are identified, the existing research does not answer the broader question of how to recruit top talents successfully, nor what content interests and convinces this particular target group in their search for the right employer. At the same time, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is gaining importance. There is no uniformly valid definition of CSR. This article follows the political definition of the European Commission and considers CSR as "the responsibility of companies for their impact on society" that results in three core areas of social, environmental and employee-oriented CSR, the "social, ecological and economic contributions of a company to the voluntary assumption of social responsibility that go beyond legal compliance" (Herchen, 2007). Global social developments are opening up further fields of research. With the *#fridaysforfuture movement*, a large part of the upcoming generation is advocating the CSR aspect (Farooq *et al.*, 2014) of responsible action on the climate issue and is already putting noticeable pressure on companies in their role as employers, as the *#entrepreneursforfuture initiative* (<https://entrepreneurs4future.de/>) shows. At the same time, CSR research provides more and more business scenarios in which CSR communication leads to more intensive stakeholder relations (Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006; Hillenbrand *et al.*, 2012), also in the area of employee engagement and retention (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2008; Greening and Turban, 2000), resulting corporate success.

The fundamental question, therefore, arises what significance CSR communication has not only for employees who are already employed but also for the process of career orientation and employer decision-making by top talent. This question is of particular importance because it both responds to an open field of research (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016) and, by focusing on

content, offers practical implications for the top talent programs and resource allocation of large employers, as well as their mid-sized competitors. In this sense, the article offers a current status report on dynamic professional communication in the field of corporate communication research. It thus offers an approach to the relevant normative conditions of successful recruiting communication concerning a target group for which there has been a great deal of research interest so far but which is challenging to define empirically and even more difficult to survey. In addition, the review systematizes previous empirical research approaches for the broader field of talent research and identifies current research approaches and research gaps. More concretely, the paper attempts to consider the interdisciplinary perspectives on (top) talent recruiting and CSR communication together. In a first step, the research discussion on the significance of CSR for general business scenarios is presented in its main features. Subsequently, the question of a current change in values (Twenge *et al.*, 2010; Jin and Rounds, 2012) is discussed and reflected upon in terms of its significance for the model of cultural fit to highlight potentials for addressing the issue in the recruiting context. Finally, the article focuses on the target group of highly sought-after talents (high potentials) before a systematic literature review summarizes the status of the current research discussion on this topic and points to further research questions. In this context, the communicative process between top talent and companies is understood as a fundamental part of strategic corporate communication, as the recruitment of capable young executives serves to secure the company's success (Zhou *et al.*, 2018), and employees are valued as "critical strategic firm resources" (Barney, 1991).

### CSR as a business imperative

CSR has established itself as a business aspect relevant to communication (Tiba *et al.*, 2019). CSR is sometimes described as absolutely central to corporate success in business practice, as a "business imperative" (Schaefer *et al.*, 2019a). In the course of corporate investments, social responsibility and sustainability are also relevant aspects that can promote investments (Bocken, 2015; Murguía and Lence, 2015). Howard Bowen made the first significant contribution in 1953 with his book on *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman* (Bowen, 1953). CSR means "many things to many people" (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016) and features a variety of sub-disciplines (Tiba *et al.*, 2019) such as "corporate environmentalism" (Menon and Menon, 1997), "corporate social performance" (Clarkson, 1995; Wood, 1991) or "corporate citizenship" (Waddock, 2006). Some of these research fields already suggest that CSR is not only relevant in the context of external corporate communication but also for internal stakeholders and in the course of identification processes (Baric, 2017). At the same time, CSR is a particularly dynamic concept, as social responsibility is defined by social expectations, resulting from constantly changing stakeholders' social values. Therefore, CSR and stakeholder orientation are closely linked (Sun *et al.*, 2010). CSR is the subject of both internal and external corporate communications that cannot be limited to one channel or target group and is multi-functionally significant.

CSR has long been a relevant topic in public discourse, but in recent years the *#Fridaysforfuture* movement has given it a central, cross-media platform, especially among the younger generation. Furthermore, CSR is subject to regional (Matten and Moon, 2008) or organization-specific (Spence, 1973) interpretations.

For recruiting communication and its continuous evaluation within the framework of *employer branding and human resources management* (HRM), CSR offers special opportunities to strengthen *corporate attractiveness* due to its supra-legal status.

In the context of its CSR activities, every company has the opportunity to label its values as "acceptance of responsibility." In this way, their corporate reputation can be positively influenced (Brammer *et al.*, 2015; Greening and Turban, 2000; Deshpande, 1996), and the person-organization relationship can be strengthened (O'Donohue and Nelson, 2009; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 1996; Greening and Turban, 2000; Baric, 2017).

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Carroll defined four content subcategories in his foundational paper on CSR:

- (1) *economic responsibility*;
- (2) *legal responsibility*;
- (3) *ethical responsibility and*
- (4) *philanthropic responsibility* (Carroll, 1979).

Farooq *et al.* (2014) presented an alternative differentiation that has received increased attention in recent years (Schaefer *et al.*, 2019a, b). Farooq *et al.* develop a target group-oriented model that proposes a customer *and* employee *orientation of CSR* in addition to *philanthropy-oriented and environmental-oriented CSR*. Stronger than the original areas of responsibility from Carroll's model, Farooq *et al.* address and functionalize content more strongly. Furthermore, the special significance of environmental awareness and environmental protection is additionally strengthened by the area of *environmental-oriented CSR*.

Where CSR is considered a factor in employee recruitment, significant differences in research opinion and practice become apparent. Research emphasizes the increased importance of CSR communication, especially in environmental responsibility, the associated potential for strengthening the employer brand, and the resulting optimization of HRM (Jones *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, in practice, CSR content has only been used sporadically in recruiting communications to date.

#### (1) Changing values of today's employees

*Values* can be traced back to valuations, i.e. preferences of people under the aspect of preferring and following, on which people base their actions and on which other people's actions are judged. Such preference lists can be recorded individually in value profiles (Rath, 1993). In correlation with other data, these profiles are considered value orientations of specific groupings, "milieus," societies or cultures (Inglehart, 1977). Socially, values form the basis of communicative planning and argumentation and differ interculturally and intraculturally, as shown, for instance, by the socio-demographic SIGMA and SINUS milieus. Values represent common orientations for a society. They can be used to evaluate individual dispositions to act or character traits ("virtues") (willingness to take responsibility, sense of justice, capacity for compassion). Aim these dispositions to act not at an independent ethically-relevant goal such as justice when one speaks of "secondary virtues" (e.g. reliability, accuracy and punctuality).

Values serve the purpose of understanding in social communities but are changeable as concrete preferences for action. However, system-stabilizing values have become established at the various levels of society (cf. Micro-, meso-, macro-levels, according to Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Peace, freedom, justice, health, self-determination, physical and mental integrity and love (of one's neighbor) are currently, above all, the environment can be understood as such values. Values should enable the members of societies to living together in consensus by orienting their mutual behavior to these values.

The adoption of these values as "valuable perspectives" by the individual is described as "beliefs" or "attitudes" (Rosenberg and Hovland, 1960). They are effective as a normative part of socialization, enculturation and individuation and are thus stable. In adolescence in particular, however, they may be subject to partial redefinition, which is important for corporate communications when recruiting young high potentials. *To a certain extent, attitudes or beliefs are* the receptors for values in the individual and are therefore effective on the recruiter's and high potential's side for what cultural fit means to them.

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## (2) Cultural Fit

In the context of the changed labor market and increasing employee orientation (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016), corporate culture and cultural fit between the employee (person) and employer (organization) have become a relevant decision criterion (P-O Fit) (Kristof, 1996) and recruiting content (Waples and Brachle, 2020). This trend has been mainly promoted by digitalization. In order to be able to present a measurable fit between entrepreneurial and individual value profiles, first and foremost, an empirical survey of these value profiles is necessary (see above). Before the digital possibilities for surveys and automated initial evaluation, the process of identifying one's own corporate culture was already associated with enormous effort (Sackmann, 2006). In addition, interested candidates did not have the option of measurably matching their profile with the employer profile. Here, digital providers are only catching up in the recent past (Cyquest, 2020). However, even if, in practice, cultural fit has so far only been illustrated by a small proportion of German companies in the form of a matching tool, HR managers rate the aspect of fit as fundamentally important (HAYS HR-REPORT, 2015/2016; Deloitte Millennial Survey, 2016).

### *Supplementary and complementary fit*

Current discussions of cultural fit often reduce Kristof's model of P-O fit to the dimension of *supplementary fitness*. According to Kristof, this represents a supplementary, value-based fit that fosters increased intrinsic motivation among employees. Thus, *the supplementary fit has the potential to satisfy employees' desire to engage in meaningful work for an employer judged to be "moral,"* i.e. in line with their value profile (Barrena-Martinez *et al.*, 2019; Zhang *et al.*, 2020), thus generating a particularly strong employee–employer relationship (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005).

Another type of fit is offered by *complementary fitness*. That is not about a comprehensive value-based fit but more about need satisfaction. Of course, this kind of need satisfaction can be achieved differently for employers – and addressed differently in terms of communication – than a value-based fit. Recruiting content that aims to attract employees through *complementary fitness* is more likely to be located in the area of benefits communication.

While supplementary and complementary fit refers exclusively to the individual perspective, social identity theory offers a reflection against the background of social expectations.

### *Social identity theory*

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986) states that a person does not define him or herself free from other perspectives and influences, but constantly forms his or her identity in social relationships, either through distinctions from or affiliations with particular social groups and institutions (DeRoek *et al.*, 2014). As part of this identity formation, individuals evaluate relevant social groups or organizations' attitudes, values and competencies by rejecting or sharing them (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2019). These attitudes, values and competencies fit or do not fit one's attitudes or beliefs. In terms of employer decisions, positive acceptance and an associated shared identity (corporate identity) occur when candidates evaluate the communicated values as attractive (corporate attractiveness) (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). In this process, individuals reflect in a complex way. They evaluate profiles of social groups or organizations not only for themselves but according to the perceived external prestige (P-E-P) model (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) also from the expectation perspective of other groups already defined as relevant.

Taking career decisions as an example, a highly skilled job seeker with freedom of choice would therefore apply to a company that he or she considers attractive (Kreiner and Ashforth, 2004; Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2017) and that he or she also expects to be positively evaluated by other social groups or contacts that he or she considers relevant (Carmeli, 2005). At this

point, the changed value cultures become relevant for the labor market. Concerning the *#FridaysforFuture* movement, it can be assumed based on the quantitative support within the next generation of employees, but also based on the media and social media presence, that climate sustainability and social responsibility are topics that influence both the individually perceived and peer-expected corporate attractiveness.

### (3) Target group “High Potentials.”

In the following, the target group “high potentials” and its significance as a central, strategically relevant corporate resource will be defined in more detail. In a first step, the discussion about the different naming of the target group is presented, and a reasoned argumentation for using the “high potential” term is established. In a second step, the relevance of high potentials as a significant strategic corporate resource will be clarified before the communication habits of high potentials are presented in a final step to identify the prerequisites of high potential recruiting.

#### *Discussion of terms: high potentials, suitable potentials, (modern) performers and top talents*

Specialist articles and discussions in international research and HR practice often use different terms to refer to exceptionally qualified junior staff from the 20–35 age group. In addition to the term “high potentials,” there are also terms such as “performers” (Kwon and Rupp, 2013), the general term “top talents” (Birim, 2016; Lim and Greenwood, 2017), or the term “right potentials” (Esch *et al.*, 2019). These different designations result primarily from the target perspective, i.e. the position/function talented young employees should assume in a company. Therefore, this fundamental aspect of corporate reality will be given special consideration in the following discussion of the individual terms.

The term “top talent” is the most general and comprehensive expression. Unlike “performer,” “talent” refers to a potential that is attributed to a person and does not necessarily have to be proven or already transformed. In addition, talent in the HR context does not necessarily mean only hard skills. Also, it considers the intrinsic motivation and joy of a person in active problem solving, working and their drive for further development. “Talent” can thus be understood from both an external and an internal perspective and can mean both hard and soft skills, transformed as well as unrealized talents. Since the performance dimension can still be blurred in the case of “top talent,” their target positioning in companies is also not fixed. Talented employees can be employed in top or middle management or operations.

The term “performer” is to be distinguished from this. In an extreme interpretation, “Performer” refers to a SINUS/SIGMA milieu and thus also reflects a value orientation of the persons (Sinus Institut, 2020). In any case, the designation focuses on measurable, proven, and transformed performance, which is mainly realized in hard skills. Performers are performance- and output-oriented and achieve their status through competitive performance that represents a “more,” “better,” or “surpassing” or “outperforming” other applicants or employees. Performers must necessarily be top talents to achieve particularly outstanding performance, but top talents do not necessarily have to become performers. Performers are characterized in the strictest sense of the milieu localization by an economic orientation, which likewise exposes them to leadership and very well-paid operations activities. The term “high performer” also refers to the underlying understanding of performance. The occasional additions as “modern” or “digital” performers indicate a work-cultural, modal classification of the individual performance but do not change it in its core.

Finally, the “potential” designations differ from the talent and performer designations. In practice, the common term “high potentials” is often attributed to outstanding graduates and thus receives a performance component (Ready *et al.*, 2010). It is easily overlooked that academic performance, especially according to the competency model of German school and university didactics, puts an enormous focus on soft skills such as teamwork.

“High potential” thus contains a soft-skill component that is rarely considered in current research discourse but is central to successfully mastering the task settings of future leadership positions. High potentials are characterized by high-quality output and above-average input, high resilience, and strong commitment (Ready *et al.*, 2010). The “high potential” is thus very close to the “performer” in the performance dimension but extends this by a social, work-cultural component. In modern work settings, which declare the reflection and further development of corporate and work culture to be the task of managers, these competencies are highly relevant.

The relevance of work culture is also relevant to the term “right potentials” (Hesse and Mattmüller, 2015). This term focuses on the employee’s cultural fit to his employer in general and the specific function in the company in particular. At the same time, however, the term limits itself since the suitable (in the sense of “right”) job can also be an operational job without management responsibility or particularly high business value. In extreme terms, the general goal is to fill every position with the “right potential” in the sense of a “suitable” employee.

In summary, it can be said that the term “high potentials” best covers the requirements profile for future managers since, in addition to the demand for particularly high output quality, the input level and employee commitment are also taken into account. Likewise, soft skills and potentials to be continuously developed (in lifelong learning) play a more significant role than performer terms. For this reason, the term “high potentials” is given priority in the following when the target group of prospective managers is put into perspective.

## Review

With the growing importance of CSR in the general business context and its application for HRM purposes, the research interest expands to new intersection.

To identify a foundation for future focus studies and targets of practical implications, the need for an updated systematic literature review arises. In the following, the author conducted a systematic literature review to summarize the research and publication activities in the field of CSR-HRM. A particular focus is placed on the target group of high potentials or talents to be recruited for management positions. Therefore, a particularly relevant reference for the review is the work of Voegtlin and Greenwood (2016), which considers the broader intersection of CSR–HRM.

## Methodology

Voegtlin and Greenwood (2016) conduct a systematic review (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003) of the literature of the CSR-HRM intersection. They provide a multidisciplinary framework to understand the role of CSR in HRM, thus recruiting and expanding knowledge in this area.

The author adopted the guidance of Voegtlin and Greenwood, including their defined approach.

They conducted a Boolean search in 11 EBSCO online databases [1] “combining one of several “CSR-terms” with one of several “HRM-terms,” within the title, abstract or subject terms of peer-reviewed journals, and repeated the search for all possible combinations.” (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016). The author extended this search model to include the target group of high potentials and integrated corresponding search terms as a supplement. Specifically, the search process was performed by cross-tabulating an extended list of HR terms with CSR terms using the search operator \*AND. Due to the already derived inconsistent usage of the term “high potentials,” the terms performer, talent\* and right potential\* were also included synonymously in the search. In addition, “recruiting” and “employer branding” were included because they describe talent recruitment and are also highly relevant as process terms. Both terms also include a corporate strategy component

aimed at attracting valuable workers. The abbreviation “CSR” was also searched for the content focus CSR.

### Findings

The author focused on the last 30 years from 1991 to 2021 because relevant CSR definitions (such as those by [Carroll, 1979](#)) can be found at the beginning of this period.

For the period from 1991 to 2021, the search yielded 1811 hits, with some titles being returned twice due to the search terms used. The diagram in [Figure 1](#) shows that the number of publications has increased significantly in recent years. In quantitative terms, the publication activities took place in three phases. After a relatively low thematization since 1991, a first upswing phase occurred moderately between 2005 and 2010 (181 articles/avg. per year 30). A second upswing phase occurred from 2011 to 2016 (438 articles/avg. per year 73), increasing more than 100% compared to 2005–2010. The third phase is still ongoing and again shows an increase of about 50% (557 articles/avg. per year 111) compared to 2016.

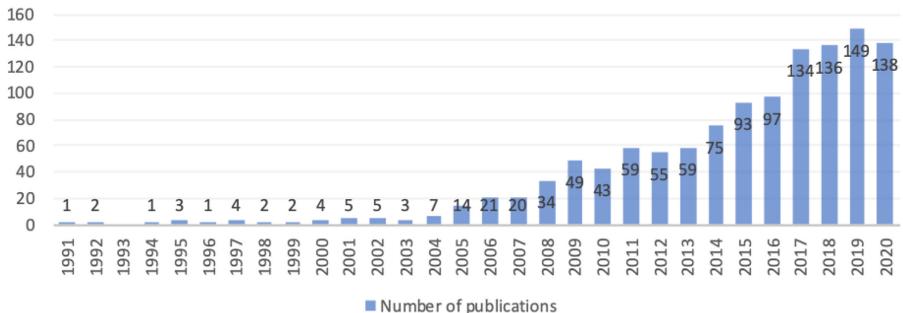
The PRISMA model (cf. [Figure 2](#)) was used for the literature reviews.

In a first step, duplicate titles from the original 1884 list were reduced to singular mentions. Of the remaining 1,277 hits, 1,181 articles were deleted in a first abstract screening because many articles were excluded because one or both terms only showed up in the “References” section—the 97 articles remaining after this were compiled as full texts. Seventy-one of them were integrated into the qualitative synthesis.

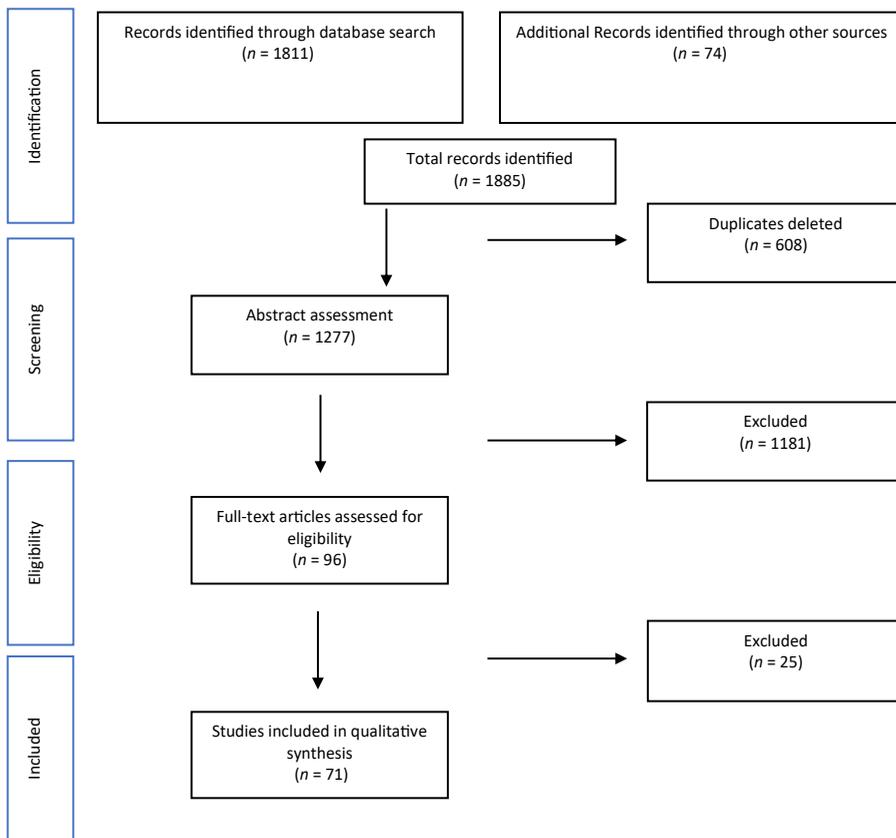
The review revealed that the articles focused on different aspects of the HRM–CSR intersection. To enable a more differentiated classification, [Table 1](#) shows the “research characteristics,” while [Table 2](#) shows the specific references to the focus “CSR – High-Potential Recruiting”.

Although the database search (cf. [Figure 1](#)) showed that significantly more publications were identified in the third phase since 2017, the systematic literature review ([Table 1](#)) revealed several thematically pertinent publications were also published within the second phase. It is particularly noteworthy that most publications on CSR and high potentials originate from the second phase (7%), while only one paper from the third phase considers this pointed target perspective. In contrast, articles on general communication expectations of applicants are significantly stronger within the third phase.

About the journals, it can be seen that most of the articles in the second phase tended to be published in communication and management journals. At the same time, the CSR focus has increased sharply in the most recent, the third phase, thus underlining the current relevance and sensitivity for the topic ([Schaefer et al., 2019a](#)). Also striking is the overall high number of publications from other journals that cannot be assigned to a common category. That can indicate that CSR is considered and researched as an influencing factor in many disciplines.



**Figure 1.**  
Publications over time



**Figure 2.**  
PRISMA screening for  
the HRM-CSR  
literature

In particular, publications related to *Finance* make up a large part of the publications grouped as “Others”.

The identified articles touch on the area of (high potential) recruiting from different perspectives, which can be represented as a four-level model of the proximity of the contributions to the importance of CSR for high potential recruiting (cf. [Figure 3](#)). The *requirement-level* ( $n = 27$ ) summarizes contributions that address basic references and prerequisites and either relate individual CSR aspects to recruiting or talent ( $n = 18$ ) or address CSR in training ( $n = 10$ ) of emerging talent. Contributions assigned to the *process level* ( $n = 17$ ) go into more depth on CSR for recruiting, human resource management and employer branding. The *perception level* ( $n = 27$ ) includes articles that address communication expectations ( $n = 18$ ) of a pointed target group as well as strategic CSR communication measures and, finally, the articles that explicitly address CSR as a measure for recruiting top talent ( $n = 9$ ). The three levels that classify relevant contributions of the analysis are encompassed by a meta-level that summarizes all singular results of the initial research.

In order to provide a differentiated view of the contributions of the individual levels, the following tables ([Tables 2–4](#)) present the contributions of the individual levels in their respective focal points.

In the requirement level ( $n = 27$ ), 19 contributions were assigned to “General CSR”. Contributions summarized under the focus “General CSR” also – but not exclusively – put

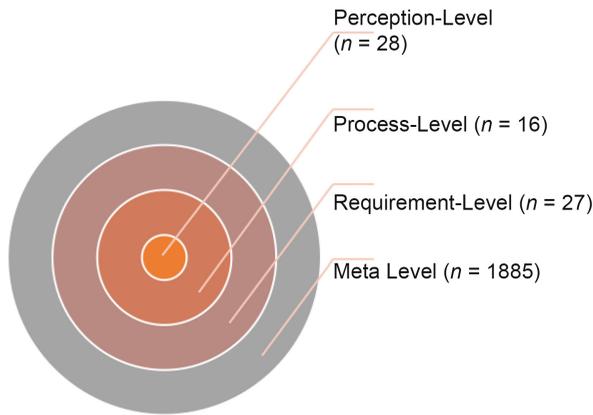
**Table 1.**  
CSR-HRM research  
characteristics by a  
period of publication

Year of publication	1991–2005 (24 Years)	2005–2010 (5 Years) first phase	2011–2016 (5 years) second phase	Since 2017 (3 years) Third phase	1991–2020
Type of Journal					
Business Ethics/CSR	–	–	3 (4)	14 (19)	17 (24)
HRM	–	–	1	6 (8)	7 (10)
Communication and Management	1	1	13 (18)	8 (11)	21 (30)
Education	–	1	2 (3)	1	4 (6)
Others	–	–	11 (15)	10 (14)	22 (30)
Focus					
CSR	–	1	7 (10)	10 (14)	18 (25)
HRM	–	1	4 (6)	5 (7)	10 (14)
Employer Brand	1	–	1	3 (4)	5 (7)
Strategic Communication	–	–	–	2 (3)	2 (3)
Employee Perception	–	–	9 (12)	12 (17)	21 (29)
Higher Education	–	1	3 (4)	3 (4)	7 (10)
High Potentials	–	–	5 (7)	1	6 (8)
Reviews	–	–	1	2	3 (4)
TOTAL (IN %)	1 (1)	3 (4)	30 (42)	38 (53)	71 (100)

**Table 2.**  
Articles of  
requirement-level

Requirement level ( <i>n</i> = 27)	Description	Articles
General CSR	Contributions summarized under the focus “CSR as a basis” also – but not exclusively – put CSR into perspective as a factor in recruiting or corporate communications	<a href="#">Hong and Rim (2010)</a> , <a href="#">Santos (2011)</a> , <a href="#">Chen and Gavius (2015)</a> , <a href="#">May et al. (2015)</a> , <a href="#">Stimpson et al. (2015)</a> , <a href="#">Birim (2016)</a> , <a href="#">Wirth et al. (2016)</a> , <a href="#">Lim and Greenwood (2017)</a> , <a href="#">Oruzheva and Gaffney (2018)</a> , <a href="#">Atif (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Baraibar-Diez and Odriozola (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Buttigieg et al. (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Hou et al. (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Lim and Arumugam (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Orsdemir et al. (2019)</a> , <a href="#">Andersen and Hovring (2020)</a> , <a href="#">Acharyya and Agarwala (2020)</a> , <a href="#">Sanchez-Arrieta et al. (2019)</a>
Education as a basis	The content located here gives particular perspective to the importance and discussion of CSR in higher education	<a href="#">Brown and Cloke (2009)</a> , <a href="#">Sanchez-Hernandez and Gallardo-Vazquez (2013)</a> , <a href="#">Hart et al. (2015)</a> , <a href="#">Reis et al. (2015)</a> , <a href="#">Tormo-Carbo et al. (2016)</a> , <a href="#">Saurombe et al. (2017)</a> , <a href="#">Zizka (2017)</a> , <a href="#">Alonso-Martinez et al. (2019)</a>

CSR into perspective as a factor in recruiting or corporate communications. Contributions in this category constitute the most abstract references included in the systematic review. Although very fuzzily defined, this category includes articles that address digital CSR communication ([Hong and Rim, 2010](#)) or social media communication ([Birim, 2016](#)) of CSR and its implications. Equally, however, this category also identifies articles that address general business value-adds of CSR communication ([Atif, 2019](#); [Hou et al., 2019](#)) or impacts of CSR on different stakeholder groups ([Chen and Gavius, 2015](#); [Baraibar-Diez and Odriozola, 2019](#); [Lim and Greenwood, 2017](#)).



**Figure 3.**  
Level-distance of the  
1885 articles to the  
research focus

Process level	Description	Contributions
HRM	These articles link CSR to (global) talent management or recruiting processes	Schoemaker <i>et al.</i> (2006), Kim and Scullion (2011), Lis (2012), Lacey and Groves (2014), Litardo <i>et al.</i> (2016), Voegtlin and Greenwood (2016), Franco <i>et al.</i> (2017), Cho and Ahn (2018), De Stefano <i>et al.</i> (2018), Lämsä <i>et al.</i> (2019), Santos <i>et al.</i> (2019), Scavarda <i>et al.</i> (2019)
Employer branding	Some articles explicitly focus on the added value of CSR communication for the attractiveness of employer brands. However, they remain more abstract and do not provide detailed knowledge about the expectations of pointed employee target groups	Fan (2005), Grigore and Stancu (2011), Carlini <i>et al.</i> (2019)

**Table 3.**  
Articles of  
process-level

Perception level (N = 28)	Description	Example contributions
Employee perception	Publications in this category deal with the perception and expectations of (potential) employees. In contrast to the following category, these articles do not focus on explicit high potential or top talent communication expectations	Auger <i>et al.</i> (2013), Low <i>et al.</i> (2017), Abd Rahim <i>et al.</i> (2011), Ishikawa (2013), Chaudhary (2017), Villafane (2017), Bohlmann <i>et al.</i> (2018), Qian <i>et al.</i> (2019), Al Halbusi <i>et al.</i> (2020), Ames <i>et al.</i> (2020)
High potentials	The papers in this category are mapping existing research on the narrow intersection of CSR in high potential recruiting	Golshan and Omar (2011), Bauman and Skitka (2012), Vaiman <i>et al.</i> (2012), Bonaiuto <i>et al.</i> (2013), Barrena-Martinez <i>et al.</i> (2015), Sohn <i>et al.</i> (2015), Merriman <i>et al.</i> (2016), Novokmet and Bilic (2016), Story <i>et al.</i> (2016), Moorthy <i>et al.</i> (2017), Hanson-Rasmussen and Lauver (2017), Chaudhary (2018), Belinda <i>et al.</i> (2018), Puncheva-Michelotti <i>et al.</i> (2018), Wang and Chang (2019), Peong (2019), Srisuphaolarn and Assarut (2019), Waples and Brachle (2020)

**Table 4.**  
Articles of  
perception-level

In addition, eight contributions were assigned to the “Education” category. The contributions in this category are related to the research question, as they reflect the discussion of CSR in higher education and thus enable conclusions to be drawn about the expectations of well-educated high potentials. Some of the contributions already explicitly address the expectations of particular student and graduate groups (Reis *et al.*, 2015; Zizka, 2017; Tormo-Carbo *et al.*, 2016), which, however, cannot be unambiguously classified as high potentials and also do not primarily put the expectations into perspective, but instead put the mediation and institutional conditions in universities first.

The contributions of the process level ( $n = 16$ ) go one step further in the direction of talent, namely in the area of addressing talent. Contributions at this level can be divided into HRM ( $n = 13$ ) and employer branding ( $n = 3$ ).

The HRM area in the process level is numerically small ( $n = 14$ ), but has several comprehensive reviews. In addition to the review mentioned above by Voegtlin and Greenwood (2016), the contributions by Litardo *et al.* (2016) and De Stefano *et al.* (2018) also take a comprehensive perspective and advocate a more vital link between CSR and HRM. Schoemaker *et al.* (2006) had already problematized a detached treatment of the topics CSR and HRM and argued for more joint consideration. First international studies then focus on CSR–HRM more strongly together (Kim and Scullion, 2011). It is striking that the topic has so far been somewhat neglected in the Central European region and relevant contributions tend to come from the Asian (Cho and Ahn, 2018; Kim and Scullion, 2011), South American (Ross *et al.*, 2016) or Southern European region (De Stefano *et al.*, 2018).

Of the three identified articles with an employer branding and CSR focus, the articles by Grigore and Stancu (2011) and Carlini *et al.* (2019) are particularly interesting. In their qualitative study for the Eastern European region, Grogore and Stancu explicitly recommend that CSR initiatives and communication guarantee significant added value for attracting new employees. In their literature review on CSR employer branding, Carlini *et al.* (2019) also report a positive impact of CSR measures on organizational attractiveness and employee engagement. Carlini *et al.* (2019), Abd Rahim *et al.* (2011) and Story *et al.* (2016) also use the Signaling Theory for theoretical orientation.

Even though some contributions with an HRM/employer brand focus (Srisuphaolarn and Assurant, 2019; Cho and Ahn, 2018) are aimed at narrower target groups, the contributions still do not focus on top talents and their communicative expectations. Only contributions at the perception level do this.

The perception level is divided into articles that refer to the expectations of applicants or employees ( $n = 10$ ) and articles that focus on talent groups that are particularly costly to recruit and put CSR into perspective as a strategic communication tool ( $n = 18$ ). For perception-level and significantly the articles on general employee and applicant perceptions, two aspects stand out in particular:

In terms of content, the level is mainly distinguished by the fact that several papers considered the issue of extrinsic vs. idealistic employee motivation by analyzing financial aspects, or the relationship between benefits and CSR added values (Merriman *et al.*, 2016; Wang and Chang, 2019), concluding that P-O ethical fit and CSR perception are relevant factors for students and young professionals. That leads to a technical conclusion. In the area of perception levels, a higher number of empirical contributions occur. Since mostly very concrete questions are considered on practical cases, and factors are evaluated in direct relation to other incentives, empirical settings such as surveys (Abd Rahmin *et al.*, 2011; Story *et al.*, 2016; Chaudhary, 2017; Peong, 2019) and experiments (Auger *et al.*, 2013; Merriman *et al.*, 2016) are suitable.

The contributions by Auger *et al.* (2013) and Waples and Brachle (2020) provide a good summary of the development in the last decade of research. In 2013, Auger *et al.* concluded that, although there is no general statement, MBA graduates tend to take up employment with good employers for career-related reasons and because of immediate financial

incentives. Waples–Brachle treat the 2020 issue with a solid generational focus, rejecting a blanket judgment. However, they tie the evaluation of extrinsic vs. ideational motivators even more closely to age and gender. The reviews conclude the perspective on general employee and employee recruitment.

Finally, only eight contributions are closely related to the research perspective on the communicative effects of CSR on high potentials. The oldest empirical contribution by [Golshan and Omar \(2011\)](#) focused on millennial talents and their evaluation of recruitment criteria. The authors found that pay and development prospects are very relevant even at the start-up level studied. However, CSR sensitivity is an equally relevant factor and was identified as attracting talent, especially for smaller companies. This basic statement is echoed in the review by [Vaiman et al. \(2012\)](#). The Italian study by [Bonaiuto et al. \(2013\)](#) also considers other benefits and perspectives, as well as for the first time in connection with high potentials/prospective executives the aspect of remote work, which may gain in importance as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Sohn et al. \(2015\)](#) describe the digital provision of CSR content and its importance for perceived CSR. Sohn *et al.* conclude that the simplified and precise provision of CSR information sustainably supports CSR perception and the attractiveness of employers in the logistics sector. Thus, the paper serves as a relevant benchmark in the German area.

The quantitative study by [Barrena–Martinez et al.](#), also published in 2015, offers relevant added value. It defines the most relevant CSR attractors for university graduates and, in particular, balances social integration factors as more robust drivers than personal integration factors.

An even more differentiated approach is taken in the article by [Story et al. \(2016\)](#), which reflects the influences of external and internal CSR activities on organizational attractiveness and firm reputation in a two-part study. In the first part, the authors found that CSR communication increased employer attractiveness and specified in the second part of their study that internal CSR activities positively influenced both employer attractiveness and firm reputation in the process. In contrast, external CSR measures had a more substantial effect on organizational attractiveness through firm reputation. In their outlook, the authors formulate the need for comprehensive CSR activities, which, in addition to employee-oriented CSR, also require environmental CSR ([Farooq et al., 2014](#)) and other corporate initiatives to be evaluated as a consistent CSR actor. However, in their study, Story *et al.* also focus on master's degree students in general, who do not have to be high potentials in the narrow definition.

The article published in the following year by [Hanson-Rasmussen and Lauver \(2017\)](#) focuses dominantly on environmental CSR in cross-cultural terms. The authors conclude that environmental CSR is also valued significantly differently by the next generation of talent in the various nations and cultures and that it is, therefore, possible to speak of a global trend, but not of a globally consistent level of importance.

Finally, the contribution “Winning CSR strategies for the talent war” by [Srisuphaolarn and Assarut \(2019\)](#) is directly relevant, although it too does not explicitly address high potentials. However, Srisuphaolarn and Assarut conclude that CSR factors do not work the same for all employees, high potentials or genders, but are interpreted in a group-specific way. Therefore, the outlook of the article “Winning CSR strategies for the talent war” leads directly to an exciting research question that needs further research – Can CSR strategies in the recruiting of high potentials also be winning strategies? – And at the same time draws attention to the necessity of such a research question.

## Conclusion

CSR is a trendy topic in communications. Not only have general research and publications on CSR increased rapidly in recent years, but the frequency of publications in the intersection

of CSR and talent recruiting has also increased significantly in recent years (Figure 1). The highest number of publications per year to date was reached in 2019 with  $n = 149$  publications/year. Consistent with the previous research findings of Voegtlin and Greenwood (2016) is that publications in the intersection of top talent communication and CSR synchronously follow the more general increase in publications in the CSR and HRM field. What is striking here is that CSR is not viewed from a narrow perspective but very much in connection and intersection of different disciplines and research questions.

CSR is considered a factor for comprehensive corporate success and is taken into account in all areas of economic activity. As a modern phenomenon that is also shaped by the value orientation of the younger generation (Inglehart, 1977; Waples and Brachle, 2020), CSR efforts and CSR communication in recruiting have become the relevant P-O-Fit indicator (Wang and Chang, 2019). In particular, environmental CSR (Farooq *et al.*, 2014) is gaining importance here (Story *et al.*, 2016).

Although CSR has long been recognized as a relevant factor for organizational attractiveness (Greening and Turban, 2000) and talent attraction and its importance is reflected in the ongoing “war for talent” (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) in which (prospective) leaders are considered a critical human resource for corporate success (Ansoff, 1965), few contributions are focusing on successfully recruited future leaders/high potentials. Instead, most existing contributions consider junior employees who are still in the training phase (Barrena-Martinez *et al.*, 2015; Hanson-Rasmussen and Lauer, 2017; Zizka, 2017; Novokmet and Bilic, 2016; Wang and Chang, 2019; Sohn *et al.*, 2015; Reis *et al.*, 2015). However, top students do not constitute the high potential group *per se*. It is uncertain whether they can aspire to leadership positions at all and thus become cultural ambassadors of their later employers to a particular extent.

### *Implications*

There is a knowledge gap about the importance of CSR in high potential recruiting, which influences both resource-strong decisions on the company side and the communication behavior of applicants.

According to current knowledge, companies only know about a general CSR relevance for employees and applicants. Accordingly, no attention-optimized CSR communication can take place. In the highly competitive battle for the attention of high potentials, this leads to undifferentiated communication formats such as social media ads, SEO strategies for websites, or generally held cultural descriptions and headhunter briefings. The less precisely the communicative needs of these digitally communicating high potentials are addressed, the higher the budgets needed to increase the reach of the measures. The result is ultimately increased media spending due to communication scatter losses.

At the same time, high potentials may not receive the CSR information of interest to them from an employer at the relevant time and therefore prefer another employer whose communication is more convincing even apart from CSR. Even value-oriented talents must therefore at least make additional communicative efforts to obtain the desired information. Specific to the application communication of high potentials is the fact that letters of motivation are still required for management positions and one-click applications are not yet standard. Letters of motivation are expected to express a cultural or value-specific talent organization fit. If high potentials do not know about the CSR activities that are important to them, they cannot present an optimal fit in the cover letters and thus cannot prove themselves as ideal candidates.

Since the target group of high potentials is a very small group for companies, but of high strategic relevance, research contributions on the communicative expectations of this target group are particularly relevant. Against the background of the research findings to date, it is clear that empirical studies, in particular, are still outstanding.

### Directions for future research

The review was able to show that there is strong research interest in the related topic areas, but that the intersection of CSR and high potential communication has been little researched to date. Three directions and mandates for future research, in particular, emerge from the literature review.

The first blank concerns research on the particularly pointed target group of high potentials and future executives (future executive managers).

The perception and authentic assessment of successfully hired high potentials with regard to their communicative experiences and expectations in the recruiting process represents a blank space that has already been highlighted in the research discourse (Voegtlin and Greenwood, 2016; Waples and Brachle, 2020; DeRoeck *et al.*, 2014; Brammer *et al.*, 2015) and is also of practical, economic relevance but has not yet been sufficiently addressed. Some quantitative studies so far have examined students' attitudes (Waples and Brachle, 2020; Chaudhary, 2018) or mid-to senior-level managers (Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018; Belinda *et al.*, 2018), but a focus on high potential candidates is not known. Instead, CSR focuses on the general target group of young talent rather than pointed to date (Chaudhary, 2018). Since the group of high potentials per company is tiny, a particular added value lies in the qualitative survey of their perceptions and experiences during employer orientation and specific recruiting communication. The qualitative observation and in-depth reflection of the target group expectations lend themselves to this, as the entire cohort of Millennials has so far been described very contradictorily in terms of their needs (Waples and Brachle, 2020). Concerning this target group, there has been a lack of national surveys and international or industry-comparative studies.

The mandate also accompanies this first approach of exploring the perspective of high potentials for a more substantial consideration of the second group of actors: the personnel group of HR and communication managers. Due to the high potential of CSR communication for increasing the attractiveness of the employer brand in general, the question arises why less than 20% of companies have integrated CSR into their communication strategy (Belinda *et al.*, 2018). In this case, it would be interesting to specifically examine whether companies and communication managers actively choose not to include CSR in their recruiting communication strategy in favor of other aspects or whether it is a lack of knowledge among those responsible (Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, elaborating the perspective of HR and communication managers also serves as a reflective foil, as it clarifies the intention of the signal sender (Schneider, 1987).

Finally, this consideration of sender intent also leads to the mandate of a final review of specific sender activities. Although digital recruiting is often evaluated by default and partly automated channels candidates, have used to find companies, the bundled evaluation of value-based lead content is still missing. There is currently no known work on search engine optimization (SEO)/search engine advertisement (SEA)-optimized communication of CSR content for recruiting purposes. A systematic analysis of CSR communication in business networks such as Xing or LinkedIn for recruiting purposes has also been lacking to date. Are CSR factors only communicated in business reports and subpages, or are they sometimes part of the recruiting funnel and search engine optimization? Evaluating the digital strategy behind CSR communication promises unique insights for recruiting communication.

### Note

1. Databases included for the review: Business Source Premier; EconLit; Regional Business News; SocINDEX; ERIC; Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts; Historical Abstracts; Communication & Mass Media Complete; GreenFILE; Political Science Complete; PsycARTICLES.

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**Further reading**

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